



## what is an ophthalmologist? a closer look

### WHAT IS AN OPHTHALMOLOGIST?

An ophthalmologist (Eye M.D.) is a medical doctor with additional specialized training in all aspects of eye care — medical, surgical and optical.

### HOW IS AN OPHTHALMOLOGIST DIFFERENT FROM AN OPTOMETRIST AND AN OPTICIAN?

Ophthalmologists are different from optometrists and opticians in their training and in what they can diagnose and treat. As a medical doctor, an ophthalmologist is licensed to practice medicine and surgery. An ophthalmologist diagnoses and treats all eye diseases, performs eye surgery and prescribes and fits eyeglasses and contact lenses. Ophthalmologists complete:

- Four years of college;
- Four years of medical school;
- A one-year internship;
- At least three years of residency (hospital-based training) in the diagnosis and medical and surgical treatment of eye disorders.

An **optometrist** is a doctor of optometry, licensed to practice optometry. Optometrists determine the need for eyeglasses and contact lenses, prescribe optical correction and screen for abnormalities of the eye. In many states, optometrists can prescribe a limited number of drugs to help diagnose and treat certain eye conditions. Optometrists do not perform surgery. Optometrists attend two to four years of college and four years of optometric college.

An **optician** — licensed by a state to make optical aids — fits, adjusts and dispenses eyeglasses and other optical devices on written prescriptions of a licensed ophthalmologist or optometrist. Training for an optician varies from a preceptorship to two years of opticianry school.

### HOW DOES AN OPHTHALMOLOGIST BECOME CERTIFIED?

After four years of college and eight additional years of medical education and training, an ophthalmologist must pass a rigorous two-part examination given by the American Board of Ophthalmology.

### WHAT IS A SUBSPECIALIST?

While all ophthalmologists specialize in eye problems and can treat all conditions, some decide to specialize in a specific area of medical or surgical eye care. This person is called a subspecialist. He or she usually completes a fellowship, which is one or two more years of training in the chosen area. Common areas of subspecialty include glaucoma, retina, cornea, pediatrics and strabismus, and plastic surgery.

### WHEN SHOULD I SEE AN OPHTHALMOLOGIST?

You should have your eyes examined by an ophthalmologist if you have any of these signs of or risk factors for eye disease:

## what is an ophthalmologist?

- Decreased vision, even if temporary;
- Distorted vision;
- New floaters (black “strings” or specks in the vision) and flashes of light;
- A curtain or veil blocking vision;
- Halos (colored circles around lights);
- An eye injury or eye pain;
- Red eye;
- Bulging of one or both eyes;
- Misaligned eyes;
- Double vision;
- Loss of peripheral (side) vision;
- High blood pressure;
- Diabetes mellitus;
- AIDS;
- Thyroid disease-related eye problems (Graves’ disease);
- A family history of eye disease;
- Excess tearing;
- Eyelid abnormalities.

Based on the examination, your ophthalmologist will let you know how often to return for follow-up exams.

Because of an increased risk for glaucoma, people of African descent should see an ophthalmologist even if they have no other signs of or risk factors for eye disease. Your ophthalmologist will let you know how often to return for follow-up exams.

You should also see an ophthalmologist if your primary care provider or optometrist refers you to one.

When you have no particular problems or risk factors, recommended intervals for eye exams are:



**Newborn, preschool and preteen:** Eye exams should be given by a pediatrician, family doctor or ophthalmologist at the following intervals:

- Newborn to three months;
- Six months to one year;
- Three years old;
- Five years old;
- Later as needed.

**Adults 20 to 64 years of age.** Adults *with no signs or risk factors for eye disease* should have a complete eye disease screening by age 40 — the time when early signs of disease and changes in vision may start to happen. Based on the results of the initial screening, your ophthalmologist will let you know how often to return for follow-up exams.

**Adults 65 years or older.** Every one to two years, or as recommended by your ophthalmologist.

## WHAT HAPPENS DURING AN EYE EXAMINATION?

Your ophthalmologist and his or her assistants ask about your current symptoms and review your medical history. Eyedrops to dilate your eyes may or may not be used during the exam.

## what is an ophthalmologist?

The examination typically evaluates:

- Visual acuity;
- Need for eyeglasses or contact lenses (refraction);
- Eyelid health and function;
- Coordination of eye muscles;
- Pupil response to light;
- Side (peripheral) vision;
- Intraocular pressure (pressure inside the eye);
- The anterior segment in the eye (the area in front of the lens, including the cornea and iris);
- The interior and back of the eye.

## WHAT TREATMENTS ARE AVAILABLE FOR MY EYES?

Your ophthalmologist will discuss the results of your eye examination with you. If your eyes are healthy, you may need only eyeglasses or contact lenses to correct your vision. Or you may not need any vision correction at all.

Some eye diseases are treated with medication, such as eyedrops or pills. Other diseases may require laser surgery or other surgical procedures.

Your ophthalmologist can provide you with the treatment you need or, in some cases, may refer you to a subspecialist.

Some eye conditions cannot be cured. Nevertheless, your ophthalmologist can offer counseling and support while monitoring your condition.

### **Good medical care is based on a cooperative relationship between you and your doctor.**

You should trust your ophthalmologist to give you accurate information about your eye problem and tell you about the risks and benefits of treatment options. You should also trust your ophthalmologist to keep your personal information confidential and to provide care with courtesy and respect. Your role in this cooperative relationship is to ask your ophthalmologist questions about your problem and treatment options and tell him or her about any other health factors that may affect your condition.

**Loss of sight can be prevented!** Many eye diseases do not cause symptoms for months or years. Therefore, regular visits to your ophthalmologist are as important as regular visits to your family physician. In many cases, early treatment of glaucoma, diabetic eye disease, crossed eyes and some forms of macular degeneration can prevent loss of sight and even blindness.

Together, you and your ophthalmologist can work toward the goal of protecting your sight through early diagnosis and treatment of eye conditions.

### **COMPLIMENTS OF YOUR OPHTHALMOLOGIST:**

San Antonio Eye Center, P.A.  
(210) 226-6169  
[www.saeye.com](http://www.saeye.com)

### **Academy reviewed 08/10**

© 2011 American Academy of Ophthalmology. The American Academy of Ophthalmology, The Eye M.D. Association and the Academy logo are registered trademarks of the American Academy of Ophthalmology.